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ABSTRACT

This digest on counselor intentionality notes that the counseling profession has historically searched for characteristics and behaviors that contribute to successful helping relationships. It identifies one such characteristic, the counselor's level and degree of intentionality, as relating to the notion that successful counselors select their helping behaviors and choose specific strategies with a clear purpose and direction. A section on background begins with Rollo May's introduction of the concept of intentionality as a client characteristic in the late 1960s and goes on to trace the development of the concept through Ivey's (1994) description of counselor intentionality as a process of "acting with a sense of capability and deciding from a range of alternative actions." The next section focuses on the bipolarity of intentionality, noting that intentionality can be either constructive or destructive. The risks surrounding unintentionality are then discussed. A section on research of counselors' intentions notes that preliminary studies have concluded that some relationships exist between counselors' intentions and helpful processes. The digest concludes with a brief summary of intentionality in the counseling process. (NB)

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Counselor Intentionality and Effective Helping

John J. Schmidt

The counseling profession has historically searched for characteristics, traits, behaviors, and other variables that contribute to successful helping relationships. One characteristic that emerges in contemporary literature and research relates to the notion that successful counselors select their helping behaviors and choose specific strategies with a clear purpose and direction. This characteristic is referred to as counselor's level and degree of intentionality (Ivey, 1994; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Schmidt, 1984). Research indicates that effective counselors tend to exhibit positive perceptions of self and others, are personally motivated and fully functioning, accurately assess the world around them, and are capable of using this assessment to facilitate beneficial helping relationships (Schmidt, 1984).

Background

Rollo May (1969) presented the concept of intentionality as a client characteristic that is essential for successful therapy, and in doing so described intentionality as a person's inner "structure which gives meaning to experience" (1969, p. 223). In addition, May noted that intentionality embraces the qualities of being "purposeful," "stretching toward," and "caring for" that encompass truly helping relationships. As such, intentionality becomes synonymous with the ability to link one's inner thoughts with one's intentions and behaviors. Using this definition, we conclude that, in practice, successful counselors have the ability to connect their diagnostic views with specific strategies and behaviors to assist particular clients. Successful counselors are able to form their behaviors and select helping strategies based on their understanding of client's experiences. Naturally, this understanding is highly influenced by the counselor's perceptions of the client's world. It is the combined inner perceptions as well as conscious intentions of the counselor that produce successful relationships.

Bugental (1980) illustrated intentionality as a preconscious process leading to interaction. As persons move from intentionality, through wishing and wanting, to actualization and interaction, they achieve a sense of worth and "the power of *being*, reaching forward into *becoming*" (Bugental, 1980, p. 56). In applying this notion to the counseling process, we hypothesize that everything a counselor says or does is influenced by his or her own level of intentionality.

Ivey (1994) describes counselor intentionality as a process of "acting with a sense of capability and deciding from a range of alternative actions. The intentional individual [counselor] has more than one action, thought, or behavior to choose from in responding to changing life situations" (1994, p. 11). In this definition, Ivey combines the goals of counseling with an understanding of the processes inherent in successful helping relationships. He also describes intentionality as a quality that counselors have to varying degrees; some are highly intentional and others lack intentionality. Accordingly, a counselor who lacks intentionality "persists in using only one skill, one definition of the problem, and one theory of interviewing, even when the theory isn't working" (Ivey, 1994, p. 12). This notion of "lacking intentionality" implies that counselors either have the ability to be intentional or they do not. As such, Ivey places more importance on a counselor's conscious awareness and ability to become intentional. By comparison, May (1969) viewed one's inability to see other alternatives as being trapped in an intentionality that makes it virtually impossible for the person to see other options. Likewise, Bugental (1980) referred to "intentionality blindness" as a "crippling of the life force" that keeps an individual from realizing healthy interactions. The essential meaning of intentionality has implications for the practice of counseling. Counselors who perceive their clients' concerns accurately and choose a clear direction and purpose in their helping relations based on these perceptions are more likely to be successful.

Bipolarity of Intentionality

Professional counselors are in a unique position to influence people when they are making important life decisions. This is a powerful position to hold and one that brings with it tremendous responsibility. A counselor's intentionality contributes to both the degree and direction of these helping relationships.

Purkey and Schmidt (1987) posited that intentionality can be either a constructive or destructive force in human relationships. Counselors who are keenly aware of their own development, frailties, competencies, and limitations are better prepared to direct their own intentionality in beneficial ways. They behave in ways that are in the best interest of their clients. Regrettably, not all people behave in this manner. Some people, including a few counselors, act from a posture of malice and destruction. They prey upon the vulnerability of others, seeking their own satisfaction, feeding their own psychopathology, with no regard for the welfare of others. In this way, these people are ***intentionally harmful*** to those who seek their help and assistance.

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Counselors who violate confidentiality to satisfy their own feelings of insecurity or who encourage sexual relationships with clients under the guise of teaching them to cope with difficult situations are two examples of functioning at most destructive levels of intentionality.

At the other end of the intentional spectrum, we find the optimum level of professional functioning. Here counselors choose strategies, plan programs, and establish relationships aimed at relieving pain, solving problems, enhancing environments, and generally behave in beneficial ways. While the best of counselors may strive to function always at the highest level of intentionality, their humanness sometimes causes them to lose some direction and purpose in their functioning. When this happens, even the most effective of counselors operates at a level of uncertainty and *unintentionality*.

The Risk of Unintentionality

All of us at some time or other lose direction or a sense of purpose. When this happens, we function at a level of unintentionality. Sometimes the outcome of this behavior is hurtful feelings and harmful relationships due to our thoughtless and careless actions. In counseling relationships, these negative outcomes are particularly sharp because they destroy the trust so essential to professional helping.

Other times, people may function in unintentional ways, yet positive results occur. Counselors often comment about their successes with particular clients, but they are uncertain as to why these positive results happen. Good fortune should not be discounted, even in professions such as counseling, but when we rely solely on serendipitous counseling to produce consistently beneficial results, we place our helping relationships in jeopardy.

Research of Counselors' Intentions

Researchers have examined the relationship between counselors' intentions and the helping process (Elliot, 1979; Fuller & Hill, 1985; Kivlighan, 1990). Intentions are defined as "the covert rationale behind the use of specific interventions" (Fuller & Hill, 1985, p. 330). Preliminary studies have concluded that some relationships exist between counselors' intentions and helpful processes. In all instances, researchers have noted methodological limitations, particularly in identifying and rating counselors' intentions and controlling extraneous variables.

As noted in this digest, intentionality is an emerging concept in counseling as it is in teaching and other helping professions. Further research is needed to confirm the existence of this construct and identify the characteristics and behaviors that distinguish levels of intentional functioning. As with other psychological constructs, measurement is an immediate challenge. Valid observational techniques, self assessment processes and other methods need to be developed to determine if this construct has potential in helping counselors to examine their level of professional functioning, the purpose and direction of their helping behaviors, and the effects on their helping relationships.

Summary

Theorists who advocate the importance of intentionality in the counseling process (Ivey, 1994, Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Schmidt, 1984) have noted some specific behaviors and traits that contribute to and enhance a counselor's intentional functioning. The first of these includes the traditional "core conditions" of the helping relationship espoused by Carl Rogers and many others. The root meaning of intentionality is to tend to something, which parallels the concepts of caring and empathy, so important to effective counseling. At the same time, intentionality, as noted above, suggests a definite direction and purpose in a relationship. Professional counselors, by definition, must maintain a positive, beneficial direction in their relationships, and simultaneously understand why this direction is being taken.

Another important aspect of counselor intentionality is the ability to seek alternative solutions and choose from an array of strategies in helping people make decisions and solve problems. In sum, the intentional counselor is one who learns many helping strategies, continues to accumulate knowledge of human development and related critical issues, and offers clients a relationship in which all possibilities can be explored, examined, and evaluated.

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